

**National Geographic and NOAA's Grays Reef Sanctuary Field Study**  
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**By Francesca Cava**

*“How do you learn about a special place in the ocean 70 miles offshore and 60 feet deep?” “How can you protect this very unique underwater ecosystem when you may never even be able to see it?”* These were just two of the many questions twenty-four high school students and teachers confronted as the first participants in the Grays Reef Field Study hosted by the National Geographic Society and NOAA's National Marine Sanctuary Program. Students and teachers from Colorado, Washington, Texas, Michigan, Indiana, Minnesota, Virginia, Oregon and Florida met on Skidaway Island, Georgia, for a 5-day expedition filled with activities that explored the local watershed, listened to experts, scientists and local residents and captured their experience in over 1900 photographs. These images, seen through the students' eyes, told a story of a unique coastal environment and this once in a life-time field study.

The trip was all about “rivers to reefs.” How everything and everyone is interconnected with the environment in which we live. How ocean reefs are affected by what we put in our air, rivers, streams and even in our soil. How a very special national treasure, the Grays Reef National Marine Sanctuary, can be a place that needs our attention and protection.



Photograph by: Junko Kondo

The field study started with a 10-mile kayak trip that brought all the detail of the Altamaha River into focus. A lazy, winding tea-colored river surrounded by wetlands and the home of many fascinating critters. A place not only for kayaking, but also for transporting effluent from areas upstream of the ocean. A place to learn how to measure water quality and see what, if any, impacts we are making on this fragile environment. Tests conducted on this trip showed the water to be relatively pristine. They also showed how measurements taken off the

Georgia coast vary considerably from those made in other areas of the country.

Over the next few days, students continued their odyssey to visit Georgia's famous barrier reef islands. The students saw how the islands provide protection from off-shore storms, habitat for coastal birds and nursery areas for marine fishes. The islands also allowed the students to glimpse visiting dolphins swimming in near shore areas. And, to meet people only found on these barrier islands. People like Cornelia Walker Bailey, a descendent from slaves brought to the islands in the 1800's. Ms. Bailey, author and storyteller, wove a tale of the special life found only on Sapelo Island. Students were also able to try their hands at basket making with master craftsman Ms. Yvonne Grovnor.

The culmination of the field study was the premiere of the students photographs made into a movie entitled “Rivers to Reef – A Visual Journey.” The students opened the showing, with the following statement:

*“This past week, we all came together from different places all over the country. Even though some of us came from land locked states, we all share the same ocean, whether it is rain, snow, humidity, or the open sea itself.*

*This week we have all learned that where you live has nothing to do with it, the ocean effects you no matter what... When we leave for our own states, we might not remember statistics, percentages, or the names of some of the different species; but we will all leave with a better understanding, idea of, and respect for the people, culture, and coastline of Georgia. And, now we will let our photos speak for themselves...”*



Photograph by: Carlos Orozco

The students’ presentation captured the highlights of the trip and the expressions of fun and wonder experienced by all. It was a photographic journal not only of what was learned, but also an invitation to inspire others to plan future explorations of these special places: Grays Reef, a National Marine Sanctuary and national treasure.

In response to “What did you learn from this trip?” Texas high school student Austin Carlson responded, “I learned much more about the importance of the oceans and the interconnections of humans and our environment...how precious marshland and coral reefs are and how their survival is not only necessary for our lives, but for the lives of countless species...”